Reference Checks
A Guide to Performing Reference Checks
Version A, April 2011
Introduction

Performing reference checks is an important step in a recruitment process. It allows recruiters to confirm the information that a candidate provided on his/her curriculum vitae (CV) or during an interview. Although the process may appear simple, it is essential that strict guidelines are followed when performing reference checks as the practice is subject to personal information protection legislation. This guide details the process which must be respected as well as information which may not be collected through reference checks. Your Employment Advisor is available to perform the reference checks. A sample questionnaire is offered for your information and if following a discussion with your Employment Advisor you perform the reference checks.
Reference Check Process

The reference check process can be divided into three steps: obtaining consent, collecting the information and handling the information. Each step is important and should be carefully followed.

- **Obtaining consent**

Before performing a reference check, written authorization **must always** be provided by the candidate. If the interviews are scheduled by the Human Resources Department, candidates will be sent the reference authorization form by email and will be asked to bring the signed consent form to the interview. If your department is scheduling the interviews, we ask that you provide candidates in advance with the reference authorization form (Appendix 2).

Candidates are asked to provide three references which must be of a professional nature (i.e. supervisor, or client). We do not recommend personal references such as co-workers, family members as they will not be able to give you information pertinent to work and are often quite partial. When the candidate does not have any work experience, professors can be used as referees as they would be able to indicate the quality of the work of the candidate while in their class.

Only referees indicated on the authorization form may be contacted. Should you feel that the information gathered through these three references is not sufficient to make a final hiring decision, you may ask the candidate to provide additional references to contact. At this point, we strongly suggest you discuss your concerns with your Employment Advisor.

- **Collecting the information**

Some candidates may provide written reference letters. As written references usually do not contain all the information required and are in general always positive, we encourage you to ask for the referee’s contact information and perform a telephone interview as well. Information should be recorded in ink on a reference check form and attached to the reference authorization to facilitate retention. In order to avoid any violation of the Human Rights legislation, a list of questions should be developed ahead of time (if not using the questionnaire provided in this guide) to avoid questions which could lead to the disclosure of restricted information (see following section for questions/topics to avoid in a reference check).
When performing the reference check, it is important to respect the confidentiality of the candidate and therefore only disclose the full reason of the call to the authorized referee. For example, if you attempt to call a former employer and his/her assistant answers the call and asks the purpose of the call, indicate that you are performing a reference check on a former employee, never disclose the candidate’s name. Once you have been able to reach the referee, identify yourself and the purpose of the contact and inform them of the position for which the candidate applied. This will allow the referee to answer you in confidence and better answer your questions. Some referees may ask to see the signed authorization form before disclosing any information. This is a normal process but make sure to conceal the information concerning other referees before sending the authorization. The document can either be sent by email or fax (ensure the fax machine is only available to the respondent or that no one else will see the document).

Finally, always verify with the referee that they are willing and able to answer your questions. Indeed, it can happen that the person has not given their consent to the candidate or that they do not feel comfortable answering questions about the candidate’s work performance. If this is the case, do not insist as you may lead to information that contravenes the personal information protection legislation or with biased information. Should this happen, contact your Employment Advisor for advice.

- **Handling the information**

It is important to note that the Commission d’accès à l’information du Québec allows for the information gathered on an individual to be accessible to him/her at any time unless one «has a serious and legitimate reason for doing so or unless the information is of a nature that may seriously prejudice a third person». This also applies to reference checks and therefore the information should be recorded completely and as accurately as possible. The information must also be retained for at least one year and in a confidential and secure fashion. We therefore ask that all reference check information be sent to the Human Resources department as soon as possible after collection of the information so that it may be included and retained in the recruitment file. The information must be kept for all candidates whose references were verified, whether they are hired or not.
Questions to avoid during a reference check

All questions in violation of the Canadian and/or Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, are to be avoided during a reference check. These pertain to any question referring to “race, colour, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, civil status, age except as provided by law, religion, political convictions, language, ethnic or national origin, social condition, a handicap or the use of any means to palliate a handicap.” (Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and Sections 10 and 16 of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms).

Questions should be work-related only and should not ask for an assessment of the candidate’s character or personality.

With regard to education verifications, candidates are asked to bring their original diplomas to Human Resources when they are scheduled for their language and computer tests. You therefore do not need to ask any questions pertaining to education nor do you need to verify the candidate’s credentials; this will be done by the Human Resources department. If the candidate brings the diplomas to the interview, make sure that you see the original documents and make copies yourself.
Appendix 1: Sample Reference check form

The following is a reference check form recommended for use when performing reference checks for the University.

Questions marked with a (*) are specific to management/supervisory positions and should not be used when reference verification is conducted for non-managerial positions.

Always ask the referee if they have additional comments or information they would like to share. This often allows them to summarize the candidate’s performance.
REFERENCE CHECK

Candidate: | Position: | Date: |
---|---|---|
Referee: | Position: | Reference Checker: |
Company: | Telephone: | Alt. telephone: |

**Referee Information:**

1. What was/is your *relationship* to the candidate?
   
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

2. How long have you *known/worked with* the candidate?
   
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

**Candidate Information:**

1. In your experience, what are the candidate’s main *strengths*?
   
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

2. In your experience, what are the areas of development for the candidate?
   
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

3. * How many people *reported to the candidate* and in what capacity? How would you describe his/her *relationship with his/her team*?
   
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
4. How independent was the candidate in his/her work?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

5. How would you assess the candidate's verbal and written communication skills?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

6. * How would you assess the candidate’s strategic thinking / project initiative(s) – any specific examples of strategies that he/she implemented?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

Based on the example provided:

i. How would you rate the candidate’s leadership skills?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

ii. How would you rate the candidate’s creativity in problem solving?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

iii. How would you assess the candidate’s initiative?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

iv. How would you assess the candidate’s attention to detail (accuracy, thoroughness)?
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
v. How would you assess the candidate’s organization and time-management skills?

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

7. * How would you rate, between 1-5, the candidate's management abilities? Why?

___________________________________________________________________

8. How would you rate, between 1-5, the candidate’s adaptability to change? Why?

___________________________________________________________________

9. How would you assess the candidate’s attendance and punctuality?

___________________________________________________________________

10. Why did the candidate leave your company?

___________________________________________________________________

11. Would you rehire the candidate?

___________________________________________________________________

COMMENTS:

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

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Appendix 2: Consent Form

In order to obtain the list of references for candidates, we ask that you provide them with the following form and have them sign the document.

Referees cannot be contacted if the form is not signed.
CONSENT FORM

To be completed and signed by any person applying for a position at Concordia University

I hereby authorize Concordia University to conduct inquiries to verify my education, my work history, as well as any other information deemed necessary and to contact the individuals listed below for reference checks. I authorize these individuals to disclose all information related to my employment, including, but not limited to, the nature and duration of the employment, the quality of my performance, as well as my conduct during the employment.

With regard to my application or candidacy for a position at Concordia University, I declare that all the information appearing on my curriculum vitae is true, complete, and accurate. I understand that a false statement or an omission of pertinent facts may disqualify me from employment with the University or result in my dismissal.

Name:  
Signature:  
Date:  

| Name |  
| Title |  
| Company |  
| Relationship |  
| Telephone |  
| E-mail |  
| Employment dates |  

| Name |  
| Title |  
| Company |  
| Relationship |  
| Telephone |  
| E-mail |  
| Employment dates |  

| Name |  
| Title |  
| Company |  
| Relationship |  
| Telephone |  
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